



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

CHICKEN POX

Chicken pox, or varicella, is a comparatively harmless disease but is of importance and should be prevented because it interrupts school attendance and other work, because it occasionally causes considerable scarring of the face and because smallpox is frequently confused with it. Chicken pox is an entirely different disease from smallpox. Vaccination against smallpox does not prevent chicken pox.

Chicken pox is an infectious disease to which most children are susceptible. Adults who have not had chicken pox are much less susceptible to it but should avoid coming in contact with it. The disease is spread from person to person by means of nose or throat discharges or the fresh serum or pus from the eruption. The infection probably cannot be carried in clothing.

Incubation. It almost always takes just fourteen days for a case of chicken pox to develop after exposure. It is uncommon for the incubation to vary from this but it may be as short as twelve or as long as sixteen days. If the child is examined on the fourteenth day after exposure small blisters, or at least small red spots, may almost always be found on the chest or elsewhere. If sixteen days pass without the appearance of eruption, the person has very likely escaped infection.

Symptoms. Chicken pox usually makes itself known by the discovery of the rash. The patient, however, may have slight fever or pains in the back or limbs or may just feel ill for a day or two before the rash begins to develop. This is particularly true of adults. The disease is contagious from the time the symptoms begin to appear.

Chicken pox, as other diseases, may be mild or severe. Considerable discomfort, itching and tenderness attend when the eruption is profuse. In typical cases most of the eruption will be found on the chest, neck and back—the face, arms and legs having much less of it. It begins as small round red spots, called macules. Within a day little watery blisters, or vesicles, appear on the macules. The initial or beginning vesicles may be at the edge of the hair of the head, either at the forehead or behind the ears, or the macules or vesicles may first occur on the neck or chest. The next day more of these lesions are found and more on the following days. These lesions keep developing in new crops while the earlier ones are drying down to little scabs. The mucous membrane of the mouth and throat not infrequently presents vesicles which are prone to ulcerate and become painful.

Diagnosis. Owing to the confusion which may arise from the similarity of chicken pox and mild smallpox, it is always advisable to have a physician see the case.

Quarantine. It is essential that every case of chicken pox be reported and have a definite diagnosis made by a regular physician. Where the diagnosis of an infectious disease lies between two diseases the case should be handled as if definitely being the more severe disease; in this particular instance the case should be controlled as though smallpox and all persons coming in contact with it be vaccinated unless they have been recently successfully vaccinated.

Physicians are required to report all cases of chicken pox, as of other contagious diseases. Where the doctor is not called in the parents are required to report to the local health officer that they have chicken pox at home. School teachers should watch or closely examine their pupils, particularly if chicken pox has appeared at the school, and upon finding any suspicious cases they should send them home and notify the health officer.